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ABSTRACT

Based on multidisciplinary research findings, this report proposes an information processing model of employees' response to highly stressful information environments arising during organizational crises. The introduction stresses the importance of management's handling crisis communication with employees skillfully. The second section points out advantages of a receiver (employee) oriented communication paradigm over one focusing on the sender (management), while the third section reviews the effects of stress on employees. The fourth section cautions that each individual's response to crisis situations differs and distinguishes two classes of individuals by their reactions: copers and avoiders, and the fifth section links employee reactions to crises with their own perceptions of the organizational situation (as opposed to managements' views). The sixth section reveals how copers and avoiders respond to and process information differently in crises, and underscores that neurotic avoidance responses must be converted to productive coping responses. The seventh section reiterates that previous management efforts at crisis response have been inadequate because, being sender oriented, they differ little from normal communication. The eighth section presents the Employee Crisis Reaction Model, which addresses individual employee reactions of the following types: (1) information paralysis/denial, (2) shifting information priorities, and (3) memory and logic failure. The ninth section outlines communication strategies for use by employers dealing with each of the three reaction types. The final section presents implications for future research. (A bibliography and diagram of the model are appended.) (SKC)

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EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION DURING CRISES:

THE EFFECTS OF STRESS ON INFORMATION PROCESSING

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Abstract

Employee Communication During Crises: The Effects of Stress on Information Processing

Perhaps at no time is it more important for an organization to communicate openly, sensitively and immediately with its employees than during an organizational crisis. Such communication, however, is generally driven by management's view of a crisis, and demonstrates little understanding of how employees perceive crisis situations and, more importantly, how they respond to and process information during highly stressful times.

Based on research findings on life situations, stress, crisis management, communication and information processing, this paper builds a receiver-oriented, information processing "Employee Crisis Reaction Model." The model suggests that crisis-induced stress may, among other things, seriously impair employees' abilities to process information and constrict their decisionmaking capabilities, thus reducing employee communication effectiveness during critical times. The authors also propose appropriate communication strategies for coping with employees' information processing deficiencies.

EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION DURING CRISES:
THE EFFECTS OF STRESS ON INFORMATION PROCESSING

Introduction

Few topics of late have captured the imagination of business managers and researchers more than crisis management. Sparked by the international attention paid to crises such as Three Mile Island, Tylenol, Bhopal and Chernobyl, crisis management has been the focus of numerous books, articles and TV programs within the last five years. This expanding awareness of business' need to anticipate, plan for and be able to handle crisis scenarios has highlighted a vital component in crisis management: crisis communication.

When a crisis of major proportions strikes an organization, communication activities tend to focus primarily on external audiences, such as the media, customers, and government. Most experts of crisis management offer advice on effectively handling communication with those outside publics; however, relatively little attention has been paid to devising communication strategies for perhaps the most critical audience -- employees.

Ironically, at no time in the life of an organization is it more critical to communicate openly, sensitively and quickly with employees than during a major crisis. Employees' emotional needs for information about the crisis and how it may threaten their personal situations are high. In this stress-charged atmosphere, employees' judgment, decisionmaking and information processing abilities may be distorted or neutralized. Precisely how and why employees perceive and react to management's communication efforts during organizational crises remains unexplored. This void in research is problematical for it is this audience that may hold the key to the organization's ability to survive and then recover from life-threatening crises.

How do employees react psychologically to the stress of organizational crises? How are their information needs affected? Is their ability to process information altered? Should managers employ different employee communication approaches during times of crisis than during normal times? An exploration of these questions will form the basis of this paper, which is an effort to develop a conceptual framework for better understanding and subsequently testing empirically an employee crisis reaction and communication model.

In developing this multi-disciplinary conceptual structure, we will review and then integrate research findings reported in the literature of a number of areas: life situations, stress, information processing, crisis management and communication. We will also discuss, based on our analysis, some potential communication strategies for employee crisis communication situations. And, finally, we will offer several recommendations for future research in this area.

Toward a Receiver-Oriented Reality of Communication

Traditional approaches to communication, characterized by conceptualizations such as the "hypodermic needle" or "magic bullet" theories of mass communication, are based on what Dervin (1980) calls sender-oriented reality. Simply put, this source-initiated approach argues that the information value of the message, as constructed by the sender's view of reality, will be all-powerful in determining the receiver's acceptance of and reaction to it. This widely accepted paradigm of communication, maintains Dervin (1980), rests on "one fundamental assumption -- that information can exist independent of the observer" (p. 89), an assumption she rejects.

A number of researchers have taken the position that the strongest influence on the effectiveness of communication is the receiver's perception

of reality; that is, the receiver's view of his or her life situation is the key determinant of his or her desire for and use of certain types of information (Dervin et al., 1980; Grunig, 1978; Cappella, 1977; Donohue et al., 1975). Given this receiver-oriented subjective view of reality, many of the assumptions of the sender-dominated communication theories must be replaced with a far tighter focus on the individual's needs, perceptions, and problems. If, for instance, an employee believes he or she faces a potentially catastrophic situation, such as the loss of a job or a terminal illness, that situation may become the central focus of his or her life, coloring all other perceptions. A sensitive communicator who attempts to understand the employee's motivations may position messages designed to cater to the employee's (receiver) particular needs, rather than management's (sender).

Stress in Organizational Settings

While many factors can shade an individual's perceptions of his or her life situation, one such factor that has been studied extensively is stress, also referred to as anxiety. In particular, stress has been the target of much research conducted within organizational settings. Studies have consistently shown that highly stressful work situations are negatively related to employee physical health and job behavior. For example, researchers have found that employees' responses to high levels of stress include queueing, filtering or ignoring parts of messages from senders (Katz and Kahn, 1966; Miller,1960), absenteeism and voluntary turnover (Gupta and Beehr, 1979; Lyons, 1971), propensity to leave and job tension (Lyons, 1971), job dissatisfaction (Lyons, 1971), decreasing work role clarity (Caplan and Jones, 1975), negative effects on family life (Rousseau, 1978), and deteriorating mental and physical health (Gupta and Beehr, 1979; Caplan and Jones, 1975).

But what causes stress? In general, stress accompanies most major changes in a person's life (e.g., changing jobs, a new home, marriage, divorce, parenthood), due to the anxiety or fear of an uncertain future. Tichy and De Vanna discuss the impact of mixed emotions on individuals undergoing traumatic life changes.

> Major transitions unleash powerful conflicting forces in people, and individual psychodynamics must be understood and managed. Change invokes simultaneous personal feelings of fear and hope, anxiety and relief, pressure and stimulation, threats to self-esteem and challenges to master new situations (p. 31).

With these conflicting feelings comes not only anxiety and uncertainty, but also a sense of loss of or an inability to exercise control over one's life or work situation.

Perhaps few organizational situations can trigger stressful attitudes among workers faster than an organizational crisis. Organizations, much like individuals, move continuously in and out of periods of greater and lesser stress or anxiety. The highly competitive environments enveloping organizations today exert a vast array of conflicting forces on these organizations. When the intensity of these forces reaches "crisis" proportions, defined by Lesly (1986) as a "major turning point" that can affect "all future events" of an organization (p. 1), the organization itself and employees' perceptions of their work situations may be substantially altered or distorted.

Individual Reactions to Stress

Even as its is erroneous to presume that a given communication will elicit the same response among all people (Dervin, 1980), it is a mistake to assume that all individuals will react to a crisis or stressful situation in the same way, or even agree in their personal definitions of what constitutes a crisis.

The work of W.I. Thomas (1863-1947) is particularly relevant for its conceptualization of crisis as residing in the individual's "definition of the situation" (Volkart, 1951). Thomas made two important contributions to the study of stress. First, he argues that the same crisis will not produce the same effects uniformly in all individuals. Second, he explains that adjustment and control of a crisis situation may result from an individual's ability to compare the present situation with a similar one from the past -- and, as a result, then revise his or her judgments and actions based on past experiences. The outcome of a situation, therefore, hinges on an individual's perceptual definition of the situation and how he or she reacts to the situation. According to Mechanic (1978), Thomas' concept of crisis and stress is revealing because it emphasizes that "crises lie not in situations, but rather in the interaction between a situation and a person's capacities to meet it" (p. 293).

Similarly, in the organizational context, employees will respond to perceived stressful situations on a personal level, rather than on an organizational level. Crisis management expert Steven Fink (1986) argues, for example, that stress can trigger many different fears in employees.

> . . . any crisis, whether it is a business crisis or a personal one, is highly stressful, although it is not so much the event that causes stress as it is a person's reaction to the event. You may perceive the danger in the crisis as being a threat to your psychological safety, to your position within the company, to your status, to your individuality, or even to your survival (p. 133).

Likewise, Beehr and Newman (1978) define a stressful work situation as one that can influence the employee in both psychological and physiological ways.

> . . . wherein job-related factors interact with a worker and change (i.e., disrupt or enhance) his or her psychological and/or physiological condition such that the

> person (i.e., mind-body) is forced to deviate from normal functioning (p. 670).

Given the high probability of job stress during crises, the question that follows is: what range of individual responses are possible in a crisis or other severe stress-laden situation?

In an attmept to answer this question, a number of scholars (Freud, 1927; Goldstein, 1939, 1958; May, 1950; Janis, 1958; Leventhal, 1967) have distinguished between what they term "realistic fear" and "neurotic anxiety." Realistic fear is characterized by: (1) alertness to or vigilance by the individual to environmental cues signaling changes in the behavior of the threat (stressor), (2) an active effort to seek information about or reassurance against the threat, (3) introduction of changes the individual makes and expects others to make to minimize the impact of the threat or avoid it altogether, and (4) reduced anxiety following protective behavior or after receiving information signaling removal or abatement of the threat. Individuals who perceive that they possess this repertoire of crisis response behaviors, also called copers (Goldstein, 1958), are well-equipped to manage stressful situations, often to their advantage.

Mostly, however, people believe they are prevented -- either because of some constraint in the environment or because of some personality trait -- from exhibiting realistic fear responses. Such individuals, also called avoiders (Goldstein, 1958), may project inner conflicts to the current perceived stressful situation, and thereby alleviate tension by resorting to neurotic and defensive responses, such as panic, chronic anxiety, denial, repression or anger. Researchers label this type of stress reaction as "neurotic anxiety." It should be noted that realistic fear and neurotic anxiety are not unalterable states but rather alternative approaches humans may take to manage personal crises.

Individual Stress and Organizational Crises

Within the perspective of the present analysis, crisis-related job stress, then, is largely determined by an employee's perception of his or her work situation. The amount of stress experienced depends on the interaction among the employee's perceptions of his or her abilities, peronality and resources, with perceptions of his or her work situation.

Employees' stress levels are likely to be substantially exacerbated when they perceive an organizational situation — which they perceive as a "crisis" — as threatening their personal livelihood (e.g., hostile takeover, bankruptcy, product tampering), or health and safety (e.g., disease, contamination, major industrial accident). Such perceived threatening situations heighten employees' anxieties and uncertainty, as well as diminish their sense of control over their lives. It is the power of each individual's perceptions of his or her situation within the crisis — not necessarily management's view of it — that will ultimately determine his or her emotional and behavioral responses to the crisis. In other words, a crisis, based on a receiver-oriented reality, is when an event affecting an organization generates among many employees the perception that their jobs and/or health and safety are threatened.

To summarize, an organizational crisis may be viewed by outsiders as a situation affecting an unfeeling, inanimate institution, and by management as a situation with organizational rather than individual implications. Crisis management researchers, such as Mitroff and Kilman (1985), Meyers (1986) and Fink (1986), have concentrated their efforts on analyzing the various types of and ways to prepare for organizational crises. In actuality, however, an organizational crisis also directly threatens the wellbeing — on a personal level — of the thousands of individuals who comprise the institution. Each

employee will "personalize" the organizational crisis to his or her own work and life situation. The interaction of these factors and perceptions, then, will produce levels of stress which then influence each individual's response to the crisis itself. This paper, then, shifts the focus of crises from a management (sender) definition to an employee (receiver) definition of crises.

Effects of Anxiety on Information Processing

Crises, by definition, are situations high in anxiety-producing signals from the environment. Mixed in with these threatening signals may be potentially helpful cues coming from the stressed person's social and professional support structure: family, friends, co-workers, supervisor, etc. Since crisis resolution is critically important to each individual, as well as to employing organizations, it is essential to understand how people respond to and process information -- which may contain clues for coping -- when faced with an otherwise threatening environment.

Two types of individuals were identified earlier based on their responses to crises: copers and avoiders. The copers are of less concern from the crisis management point of view because of the ability of such individuals to cope with, manage and turn to their own advantage information in a threatening environment. Our analysis will focus, therefore, on avoiders and the three categories of information processing responses they may have in anxiety-laden situations.

The first category emanates from findings from the Yale program of research on individual responses to fear-producing information may provide insight into how avoiders -- those who exhibit neurotic anxiety -- cope with information in crisis situations. More importantly, this research provides hints as to how neurotic anxiety responses may be converted into the more productive coper behavior.

The Yale research (e.g., Janis and Feshbach, 1953, 1954; Janis and

Milholland, 1954; Janis and Terwilliger, 1962) shows that people exposed to high-fear messages are more resistant to the persuasive content of such messages than are people exposed to messages inducing low or moderate levels of fear. Janis and Feshbach (1953) proposed a defensive avoidance hypothesis to explain such resistance to high-fear messages. They suggested that individuals make strenuous efforts to escape from the fear-producing message by denying the relevance of the message to themselves. The researchers, in a later study, summarized the individual's tendency to escape from anxiety-stimulating information:

> We can view fear appeals as stimuli which are capable of arousing an anxiety drive . . . This drive state motivates the individual to engage in many different types of internal responses oriented towards the goal of escaping from anxiety-arousing cues. A major type of response that would tend to facilitate acceptance of the communicator's message consists of anticipations of averting the threat depicted in the communication through conformity with the suggested recommendations (Janis and Feshbach, 1954, p. 162).

Janis and Feshbach (1954) carry their analysis further by pinpointing an individual's range of responses to anxiety-provoking messages.

> . . . (a) when a relatively low (or moderate) strength of anxiety drive is aroused; (b) when a specific external threat is depicted in the communication and is perceived to be the one that could be averted; and (c) when the communication contains reassuring recommendations which are perceived to be a potentially successful means of averting the threat. When these conditions are not met, however, we assume that the predominant responses will tend to be of an interfering nature -- inattentiveness, perceptual distortions, (and) defensive efforts to deny or minimize the threat (p. 162).

Thus high-fear communication signals could produce neurotic anxiety unless they contain specific cues for managing the crisis or allaying the stressed person's fears. If so, the transformation from avoider to coper may become possible.

The second category of effects for stress anxiety concerns its ability to

impair an individual's ability to engage in complex, integrated thought (Driver, 1962; Schroder et al., 1967), and his or her decisionmaking (Streufert et al., 1967) and problem-solving abilities (Levitt, 1967; Sarason, 1972). According to Sillars and Parry (1982), individuals' mental processes may be influenced in various ways due to high anxiety: "Several cognitive abilities which are instrumental to social perspective-taking may be affected, including hypothetical and abstract reasoning, information search, and the ability to differentiate and simultaneously consider multiple points of view" (p. 204). Their conclusion echoes findings by Sieber and Lanzetta (1964), Holsti (1965), and Suedfeld and Tetlock (1977), who found that stress reduces significantly an individual's ability to handle complex information.

Anxiety or stress is presumed to impede information processing at two levels. The first of these concerns the use of memory. It has been suggested that the inability of highly anxious individuals to perform competently in problem-solving tasks is because they fail to use their memory structures to process information efficiently. According to some scholars (Zubrzycki and Borkowski, 1973; Mueller, 1976), the anxiety effects may occur at the information encoding or memory formation and storage stage rather than at the information-retrieval-from-memory stage. Whatever the reason, highly anxious individuals seem to use memory poorly, which can impede the search for a problem solution, as well as reduce the efficiency of the problem-solving process.

The other manner in which stress interferes with information processing or problem-solving is in the use, rather than the non-use, of logical rules (i.e., rejecting hypotheses following negative feedback and accepting hypotheses following positive feedback). Some research (Sieber et al., 1970; Leherissey et al., 1971) has shown that when highly anxious problem-solvers

are provided with memory aids, their solution performance is improved. Even so, however, solution performance does not necessarily approximate the level of performance demonstrated by individuals exhibiting low to moderate levels of anxiety (Leherissey et al., 1971). Therefore, Gross and Mastenbrook (1980) concluded that "high state-anxious individuals are capable of following some of the logical rules necessary for problem-solving, provided that memory demands are not high; it may also be that they are incapable of using other rules allowing for efficient solution attainment" (p. 605).

A third category of effects on information processing attributed to stress is McGuire's (1968) suggestion that as fear or anxiety arousal intensifies, individuals become withdrawn and preoccupied with their own problems. Distracted by personal worries, the individual misdirects his or her attention away from the task at hand (Morris et al., 1981). Consequently, performance, or possibly the ability to cope with the crisis itself, may seriously be impaired.

In summary, researchers such as McGuire (1973) have consistently found that fear-ridden, anxious and otherwise stressed audiences are difficult to both communicate with and persuade. The effects of stress can, as the evidence indicates, inhibit or distort individuals' ability to process information. In organizational settings, in particular, corporate communicators may need to seek ways to overcome stress-induced information processing barriers created by employees who see themselves as confronting a "crisis" situation.

Organizational Crises, Stress and Employee Communication

Crises, by their very nature, are stressful times, uncertain times, changing times. Employees may, depending upon the type and severity of the crisis, perceive a threat to their jobs or health or both. When a major crisis occurs, one that can negatively affect employees-at-large, the reverberations

touch all levels of an organization. "All the people involved with a company are affected, many of them deeply," writes former American Motors CEO Gerald Meyers (1986, p. 16). As employees perceive their organization entering a crisis, fear followed by panic, both of which create severe stress, may grip -- or even paralyze -- many employees' cognitive and decisonmaking abilities (Fink, 1986). This fearful view of life and work and future can strain or prevent employees' ability to accurately process and apply information from management about the crisis situation.

Despite the apparent need for a receiver-oriented model of communication during crises, the literature on crisis management, composed largely of anecdotal, "how to," and case study information, nonetheless does not emphasize the importance of intra-organization communication, emphasizing instead executives' concerns with outside audiences, such as the media, customers and government. Ironically, times of crisis are when organizations may most need close, trusting relationships with employees, as well as with other important external audiences. Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982) argue that organizations that ignore the need for bonds with employees may not survive.

> As a general rule, it could probably be posited that the more crtical or uncertain the circumstances facing the organization, the greater the necessity for strong employee linkages. In very critical situations, in fact, organizations may not survive if linkages are not sufficiently strong (p. 209).

When a crisis occurs, employees are affected on a personal level, in ways and to a extent unlike any other audience. Their immediate reaction is often to be "stunned and lose a sense of common purpose and cohesiveness" (Meyers, 1986, p. 16). Gripped by fear, employees may stray from their sense of reality and turn inward, focusing exclusively on their personal needs and ignoring the organization's needs. Meyers explains employees' response to a

major crisis.

> . . . after the failure (crisis), panic starts to set in. Events are unstructured; people are running on adrenaline, personal survival becomes paramount. Solutions are hard to define because the problems are not completely obvious. Getting good information about what is happening is difficult because much of what is reported is colored by emotion (1986, p. 18).

Senior managers may believe that they can not afford the time for employee communication during a crisis situation (Stern, 1987). Just the opposite may be true: they can not afford not to become involved in communicating with the people who are needed to help hold the organization together. Priorities may sometimes become too narrowly focused; rather than an executive's "most immediate concern" being the "onslaught of media attention" (BusinessWeek, 1986, p. 75), perhaps an equally immediate concern should be seeking help and gaining a commitment from the very employees who possess a personal stake in the outcome of the crisis. In a study incorporating over 500 interviews with employees in large organizations who went through crises, Stern (1987) discusses employees' frequently unrecognized desire to help their employers weather hard times.

> When there is a crisis, senior managers become deeply invovled in strategizing. Poor employee morale, insecurity about the future of their jobs, and criticism of management are viewed as a "natural" component of the crisis. Yet, a common complaint of employees was that they were willing to and wanted to help the company, but were simply not being asked (p. 21).

Crises bring with them unclear, uncertain periods, particularly during the early stages. Employees' needs for information directly from management are greatest during those highly uncertain times. Meyers (1986) recommends that employees should be updated on crisis events within 24 hours and then promised more information as soon as possible. A common mistake by top managements, according to Stern (1987), is in hesitating to communicate with

employees because the situation is not yet clearly understood.

> It is even more critical during times of crisis to develop a strategy for employee communication. The need for downward communication increases dramatically at a time when management often simply does not have the answers. One mistake many companies make is to delay communicating until solutions are in hand (p. 23).

Not only do employees tend to want and need more information from upper management when they are uncertain and afraid, but they also want and need to be able to provide input up the organization to management. This desire to become more involved in crisis management may offer employees exactly what they need and feel they have lost — a sense of control over their futures and a feeling that top management still values their ideas and suggestions. Efforts to seek out employees' input, argues Stern (1987), may be the difference between keeping or losing key people.

> . . . failure to solicit employee input erodes confidence in management's ability to respond to the crisis. This in turn produces cynicism, lowers commitment to the organization, and can result in turnover of exactly those employees companies in trouble (crisis) cannot afford to lose: the best and the brightest (p. 21).

Available evidence from previous crisis management cases suggests that organizations tend to communicate during crisis periods as they do during normal times. In some instances, companies have increased the speed and volume of communication with employees (e.g., Johnson & Johnson's Tylenol crisis, Union Carbide's Bhopal tragedy; see Fink, 1986), but the pattern of communication appears to adhere to a traditional sender-oriented, top-down form of communication. Organizations do not appear to consider the notion that their employees' emotional and information needs, when faced with life or career threatening situations, vary significantly and may call for different communication strategies than during more normal, less stressful times.

The "Employee Crisis Reaction Model" (described below) is based on a receiver-oriented model of communication; that is, it assumes that management

accepts the importance of adapting to changing employee reactions, needs and fears during times of crisis. Employees who fear for and are uncertain about their jobs or their health or safety may deny, misinterpret, selectively perceive or tune out information from management about the crisis situation because they may be blinded by their own sense of a "personal" crisis. Just as organizations must attempt to adapt to changes brought on by unexpected survival-threatening situations, so too must those same organizations begin to understand that their members also may be traumatized by looming crises and that communication strategies employed during normal times ought to be modified and adapted to employees' changing emotional make-up and information-processing capacity. Organizations that fail to adapt their employee communication approaches may suffer a variety of negative consequences, including increasing turnover, absenteeism, and job dissatisfaction, as well as decreasing employee health, job performance and decisionmaking capabilities.

Based on this analysis of varying employee communication needs during periods of major organizational crisis, the following section outlines an "Employee Crisis Reaction Model." This model addresses the potentially damaging effects of crisis-induced stress on employees' information processing abilities and proposes several employee communication strategies designed to minimize the negative impact on employees' communication environment.

An "Employee Crisis Reaction Model"

This paper seeks to construct a receiver-based information processing model of employees' reactions to crises. The next step will be to test the model empirically. The model grows out of an effort to integrate research findings from several bodies of literature, encompassing life situations, stress, information processing, crisis management and communication.

The "Employee Crisis Reaction Model" incorporates a number of components, linked together by a cause-and-effect sequence of emotional and behavioral phases through which employees move during organizational crises. The first component addresses an employee's individual reactions to an organizational crisis. More specifically, an employee who perceives an organizational crisis as posing a threat to his or her job security and/or health and safety will, depending on his or her life circumstances, see the crisis as a personal one and thus suffer from feelings of high anxiety, which can be a precursor to severe stress.

Consequently, the second component of the model argues that a highly stressed employee's ability to process information about the crisis situation will be impeded, distorted or paralyzed. Due to an employee's perceived personal threat from the crisis, he or she may block out the message content of information about the crisis, or inefficiently use such information by making poor use of memory and reasoning powers, or by merely turning inward and be distracted from such information due to personal concerns.

As a result of this breakdown in an employee's information processing activities, the third component posits possible negative psychological and physiological effects of such a breakdown on organizational outcome variables, such as job dissatisfaction, turnover, absenteeism, poor or paralyzed decisionmaking, substandard job performance, and deteriorating physical health, among others. These adverse effects can be moderated, according to the model, by the intervention of appropriately tailored receiver-oriented communication strategies, which are discussed in the next section.

What are the implications of the "Employee Crisis Reaction Model?" First, an organizational crisis perceived by employees as a potential threat to their jobs or health is, in employees' minds, a personal crisis. Hence, their view of the crisis may not be the same as management's view of it.

Second, employees' stress-induced perceptions of the the crisis may be colored by fear and uncertainty about their future. Third, employees may not seek out or process information as they would under normal conditions. Fourth, the employee communication strategies that were appropriate, and perhaps effective, during normal times, may no longer be appropriate in a crisis because the target audiences' motivations and needs have changed. And finally, failure to accept and adapt to employees' altered emotional state could result in a variety of adverse effects on the organization. Figure 1 graphically depicts the model.

Proposed Communication Strategies

What does the model suggest about employee communication strategies? Simply put, the potential negative impact of reduced or distorted information processing by employees under crisis-induced stress seems to demand certain communication approaches for overcoming specific information processing problems. This section outlines a series of suggested communication strategies, each of which is intended to address one or more of the potential information processing failures noted in the model. Implementation of these communication strategies should minimize or perhaps avoid the adverse effects on the organization of poor information processing.

Information Paralysis/Denial. Communication strategies designed to assist employees in overcoming general fear, paralysis or denial should address the employee's psycho-social needs. One such approach is to incorporate into the organization's crisis management plan training for top managers in stress reduction techniques and/or offering employees stress management classes or psychological counseling. A tactic aimed at reducing information processing paralysis during crises or preparing employees for a possible crisis is to form support groups comprised of cross-sections of

employees and guided by professionally trained therapists.

Shifting Information Priorities. During a crisis, when employees need information related to their "personal crisis" situation, they may be distracted by such concerns from attending to incoming crisis information. To cope with such distractions, communication should be personalized and tailored to address the personal concerns of the employee as much as possible. The use of highly credible sources for such information is recommended. One strategy might be to intensify communication from a highly credible organizational source — top management. Recent research has emphasized that employees look to upper-level managers for information about organization-wide issues, particularly during times of crisis (Pincus and Rayfield, 1985; Pincus and Rayfield, 1986).

In a related vein, employees who are confronting stressful, frightening personal situations need the comfort and security of those close to them. However, efforts by employees' family members to provide support may be hampered by a lack of information about the crisis situation. An appropriate communication strategy might be to communicate directly with employees' families, informing them about the crisis situation, how it is affecting employees and what the organization is doing to resolve it. A personal letter from the organization's CEO might go a long way in reducing uncertainty among an employee's spouse and children, who are likely to be equally stressed by the situation. In the absence of information in crises, employees and their families will fill the information void in any way they can (Stern, 1987).

Another communication tactic that may enhance employee receptivity to information from management is to make heavy use of interpersonal channels of communication (Pincus and Rayfield, 1985). Management should attempt as much as possible to establish direct human contact with employees. For instance, live speeches to or small group meetings with employees should be used over

mediated forms of communication, such as memos, articles or videotapes, whenever possible. Such personal gestures by management are not soon forgotten, and tell the employee that managment is in control and that management cares about the employee's future with the organization.

Memory and Logic Failure. As employees' ability to handle complex information during stressful times is diminished, particularly in terms of memory failure and illogical thinking, top managers should build repetition and redundancy into their communication, relying on both formal and informal communication channels. Further, because employees may not be able to provide the normal level of logic, management communication should seek to provide crisis coping advice or explain what is being done to obtain solutions to the crisis. Also, communication should explicitly connect the complex pieces of information that crises generate and discuss their implications. Such strategies should allay fears somewhat, and lessen anxiety to levels where employees' information processing abilities can function normally.

All of the above factors, either singly or jointly, diminish employees' feelings of control over their personal lives. During crisis situations, employees more than ever need to feel that they have some control over their lives. They want to be involved, to help, in the crisis management process. Stern (1987) concluded that the "failure to solicit employee input erodes confidence in management's ability to respond to the crisis" (p. 21). Managers, then, should not overlook employees' desire -- and management's need -- for upward communication mechanisms, such as a telephone hotline or special meetings with top-level executives or a suggestion system or a survey of employees. In contrast, isolating employees from information about the crisis may prevent them from their desire to assist management in resolving the crisis. Such actions may cause higher levels of stress and uncertainty among

employees, thus eroding commitment and possibly leading to greater turnover. When an organization is in trouble, that is when it most needs its best employees on the job, supporting the organization.

Although organizational management is also under stress to relieve the crisis pressures and under stringent time constraints, these communication strategies and actions can be planned far in advance, and implemented quickly when needed. Failure to communicate directly and personally with employees may simply worsen employees' fears and uncertainties at a time when management wants to reassure and comfort its people.

Implications for Future Research

The objective of this paper was to integrate findings from research on stress, life situations, information processing communication and crisis management into an information processing model to explain how employees respond to the highly stressful information environments during organizational crises. This model, as would any systematic theory-building effort, is a first step intended to generate research questions and testable hypotheses.

Current literature offers some insights into communication behavior under stress. However, the references cited in this paper suffer from two limitations. The first — particularly true of the organizational crisis literature — is that much of it is based on case studies, which provided the researchers with vignettes of employee behavior during crises, but did not explain employees' cognitive and emotional processes underlying such behavior. The other limitation — which exists mostly in the fear communication and information processing literature — is that many research findings are based on highly controlled experimental studies which may or may not be generalizable to real-life crises and organizational settings.

Given such limitations, the next step in this area of research would be to empirically test the validity of the proposed model during or immediately

following crises in real-world organizations. In the course of testing the model, future investigations should consider the following questions:

(1) Are employees' cognitive and emotional processes altered by the stress produced during times of crisis? If so, what effects would such changes have on their ability to process complex information?

(2) When an organizational crisis occurs, to what degree are employees' concerns focused on personal needs vs. organizational needs? To what extent are organizational crises translated into personal crises by employees?

(3) What information priorities do employees establish for themselves during times of crisis? In particular, what kinds of information do they want, need and seek during such times?

(4) What information priorities do employees perceive top management to set during crisis times? How satisfied are employees with management-initiated crisis information? To what extent to they attend to it?

(5) What channels (formal and informal) of communication do employees rely on most and prefer during crisis situations? Which channels of communication are perceived as most credible? Are particular communication strategies most effective in assisting employees to cope with stress and efficiently handle information from management?

(6) How effective are stress management courses, support groups and psychological counseling in assisting employees to cope with the stress of a crisis? How do employees perceive such helping tools? To what extent do they use them?

(7) To what extent are the stress-related negative information processing effects contained in the model related to organizational outcomes, such as job dissatisfaction, turnover, decisionmaking, job performance, among others?

(8) Does this model apply only to major organizational crisis situations

or can it also be applied to more narrowly confined job stress situations?

Providing answers to these questions would not only help us better understand employee behavior during highly stressful times, but may also help us identify and design more appropriate communication strategies for assisting employees to cope with crises.

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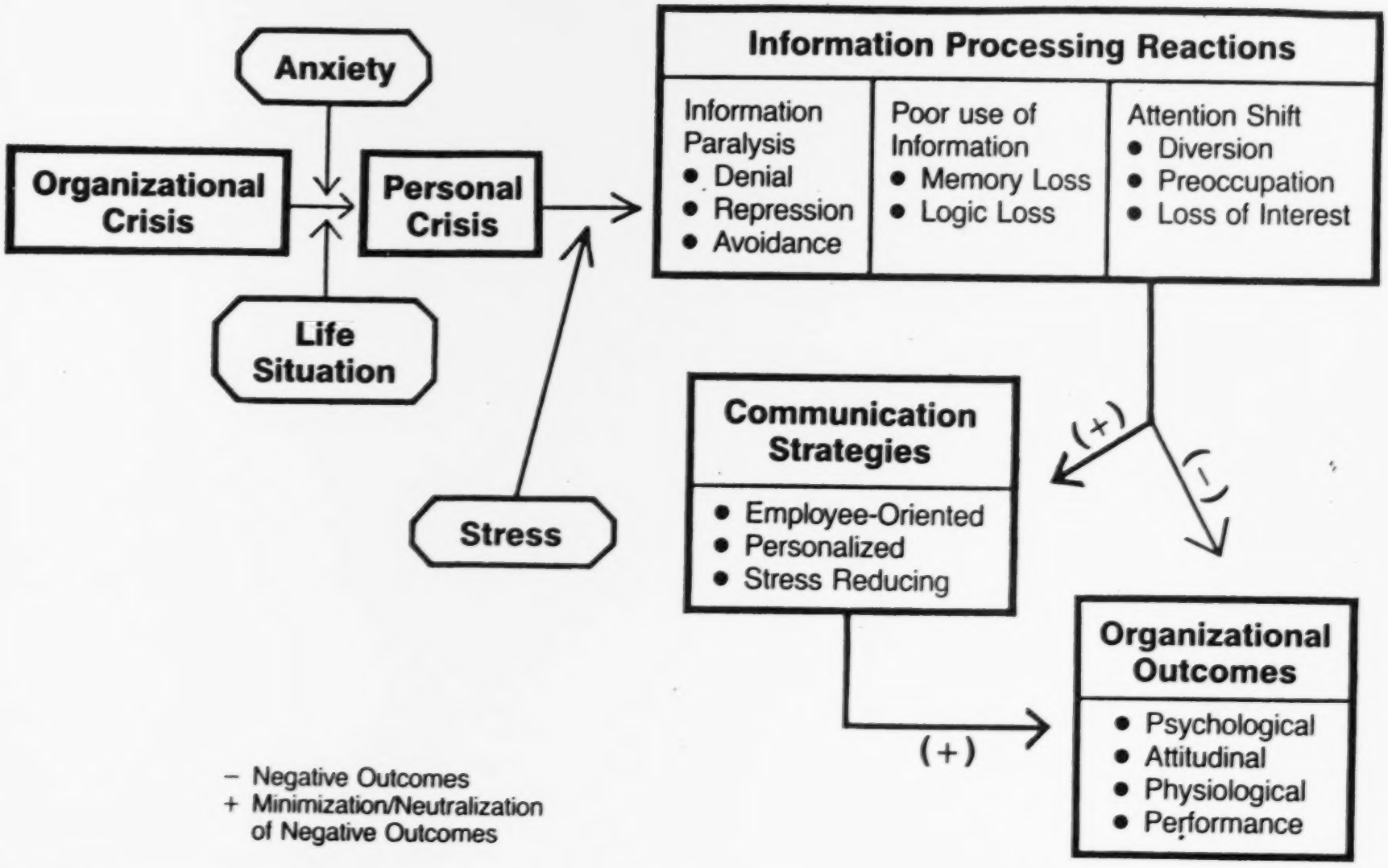
Figure 1

EMPLOYEE CRISIS REACTION MODEL



– Negative Outcomes
+ Minimization/Neutralization of Negative Outcomes